

LECTURE BY MISS MILDRED WISSLER  
LAVC Department of Anthropology  
INDIANS OF THE SAN FERNANDO VALLEY  
Meeting of L.A. Valley Historical Museum Association  
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## INDIANS OF THE SAN FERNANDO VALLEY

LECTURE BY MISS MILDRED WISSLER TO THE LOS ANGELES VALLEY  
COLLEGE HISTORICAL MUSEUM ASSOCIATION 12/6/1976  
COLLEGE

There is a great deal of material published about the Indians of Southern California or the Indians of California but it's not found in popular publications and at least putting it all together is what I attempted to do here. If you will notice, the, I think first of all I'll start with the map and introduce you to them. This is the Los Angeles area and the outlying areas. After the Indians were missionized and attached to the various missions then they were known by their mission names and all of them called Mission Indians regardless of what language they had once spoken or to what group they had belonged. You can see that within the broad basin itself were the Gabrieleno attached to the San Gabriel Mission. In San Fernando, the Fernandeno attached to the mission there. And to the north, the Alliklik living in what is now the Santa Clarita River Valley, Saugus, Newhall area. And to the east, in the mountains, at least the far San Bernadeno mountains, the Serrano, meaning mountaineer and today there is a small reservation, a Morongo reservation near Banning and if you're ever out that way, I have not visited but I would like to, there is an Indian museum on the reservation run by the Indians themselves.

Voice: And that's where?

Banning.

Voice: Morongo Indians?

Yes. And then in the desert, to the east, the Cahuilla, desert Indians, those of the Warner Hot Springs, Palm Springs area, a number of subdivisions of the Cahuilla. And then along the coast, southward, the Luiseno, in the mountains and Juaneno near the coast and then south of them were the Diegueno.

If you will notice, on your chart, there are, in terms of the language, there are three subregions. The Los Angeles

area and that would be all of them depicted on your map except the Chumash, spoke a Shoshonean language, a Shoshonean family of languages which belonged to a broader stock or super family called Uto-Aztecan to which the Aztec language belonged. There are many, many speakers of Uto-Aztecan all the way from the Utes in the north, including many southwestern tribes, including the Los Angeles Indians and spreading down through Northern Mexico, Western and Central Mexico and extending down to Central America by way of Aztec conquests. So it's a very, very extensive super family of languages. But it is assumed by linguists that this type of relationship assumes a basic ancestral community of speakers at one time.

And the Aztecs do have legends that they came from the North and indeed they did. All Indians ultimately coming from Asia across the Bering Straits and literally were the first humans to discover America. There is more and more evidence now to suggest a very early entrance into the New World, many archeologists putting it back to thirty and forty thousand years ago. But not all coming over at one time like, "Okay, guys, tomorrow we cross". Many, many migrations of generation by generation, family, families, bands throughout thirty or forty thousand years. The last to come across and to establish themselves in the North were the Eskimo, probably fifteen-hundred to two-thousand years ago, coming from Siberia as a very well developed arctic maritime economy and culture because today there are very similar kinds of people and cultures living in Siberia and they're called Siberian Eskimos. And they couldn't spread any farther south because the Canadian Indians were already there, well established in their territory so they stayed in the arctic as the type of people we know from historic

The people to the north and to the south of the Gabrieleno, and to the Shoshonian speaking people were Hokan speaking. This is another super family or stock of languages. The Gabrieleno, which is a particular dialect or actually, separate language of the Shoshonian family, actually included the Fernandeno. The people of the San Fernando Valley and the Gabrieleno spoke the same language and presumably lived the same way and were related.



From Malibu, north to San Luis Obispo, lived the Chumash. Chumash was the name the people on the Northern Channel Islands called themselves, the people of Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa. And after contact times, they, all of them became known as Chumash, even the people on the mainland.

The Diegueno spoke another variety of Hokan similar to the Yuman dialect of the Indians around the Colorado River area. So it appears that some time in the distant past, very distant, that there were Hokan speaking people all up and down the southern coastal area. And Shoshonian speaking Indians came in from the Southwest and pushed themselves through the Hokan to the coast as a wedge in between the two. This is an instance of linguistics giving us some sort of historical perspective of what happened in the past.

So, by the time the Portugese and then the Spanish, explored the coast, all the people from the San Francisco area down to the San Diego area were living much the same way and the people inland, also. And there was really not much distinction between them, even though they did speak different languages. But they all were influenced by each other, alot of trade, and influenced by, essentially, living near an ocean. This produced, actually, all the way up and down the west coast of North America from Baja California to Alaska, a culture, or cultures in a sense, that were nonproducers. These were nonagricultural people, hunters and gatherers, anthropologists call them; that they had found a spot that was ideal to live, tremendous numbers of permanent food sources, the ocean is a permanent food source, a great deal of food on land, deer in the mountains, various sorts of small animals, alot of fruits and nuts and berries there most of the year for them. So that they settle down permanently and although they're hunters and gatherers, they were not nomadic.

This produced in the northwest coast area, which is from the state of Washington up to Alaska, the so called northwest coast culture, tribes such as the ...[?], called by all anthropologists, the most highly developed, that is in terms of their social organization, of any hunters and gatherers on the face of the earth because they found extremely good climate, ecology, tremendous amount of food, both from the ocean and the rivers.

These were the people that hunt the salmon or catch the salmon and not only have it fresh but dry it. And the rivers at that time were running full of salmon all the time. This allowed them to settle down in permanent villages that allowed a much higher population density and with it then, this very complex social organization which included clans, hereditary chiefs, hereditary titles and an extreme development in the direction of accumulation of wealth and such things as the pot---[?], which rivals outgive each other and you end up with getting all the prestige and status if you have been able to outgive your rival. But it's also a way if you don't have a market economy of distributing the produce, in a sense distributing wealth.

But this kind of sedentary, that nonproducing culture extended all the way down the coast and all of these were specialized hunters and gatherers. It allowed them, then much larger settlements and many, many more people together. It allowed them to develop a very complex social structure compared, let's say, to the Paiutes of the eastern desert area of California and Nevada. Also, although the Southern California Indians were patrilineal, meaning the kinship was through the father's line and the village was patrilocal, meaning living where the father and his male relatives lived. Women did have positions of importance and this is recorded by some of the first expeditions in their journals, commenting on how they met these people and what their reactions were.

They were a very peaceful people, not warlike, very friendly and brought them basketloads of food. And they were very impressed by the abundance of it, all kinds of fish, all kinds of deer meat, sea mammals, berries, nuts, seeds and whatnot and implored them to stay, at least long enough 'till they could get their relatives from the island over to see them. This must have been a sight! However, they were not surprised, in fact, however they communicated, they finally got across to the Spanish, actually these were Portugese first, Cabrillo, "What took you so long?" And apparently they had for many years established trade routes to the Colorado River area, to the Salton Sea, to get salt to trade other things. And they had found out by word of mouth, from tribe to tribe, by this means, that the big



sailing ships and these strange looking people had visited the Gulf of California. And so they were wondering when they would get to them and they did get there a couple of years later but they were waiting for them.

Since this is a semimediterranean climate, and apparently has been for many, been very, very hospitable for many thousands of years, the people here do not wear many clothing. And particularly when it rained, it's much easier to dry off if your not wearing clothing and easier to keep warm if your inside of your house and your wet and cold and particularly if your wearing skin clothing. You know what happens to leather when it gets wet. They did wear, the women wore a double skirt and this is a very interesting picture of, and I'm not sure, it's possibly along the coast and yet it looks like it might be inland. The people lived in a brush hut called a wickiup. The ...[?] expedition was a navy expedition to the coast on the 1600's. And on board was an artist and he made a lot of drawings of their contact with the natives and this is one of the Mal-----[?] prints of the Mal-----[?] drawings showing them contacting the Indians which show the type of clothes they wear and their brush huts. The thing that is not authentic is the way he depicts the people. You can see that he gives them a sort of Leonardo da Vinci look which is not the way the Indians looked. But this is what many of the artists did. Some of the ones into ...[?] did the first one. Their stereotypes of human figures apparently was influenced by their figures of the Renaissance. So the women wore a double skirt, a plait material. So the women wore a double skirt, a plait material in the front, like a double apron and buckskin or leather in the back. The men, maybe a loincloth, sometimes nothing. They all in the cold wore rabbitskin and otterskin furs for capes and robes and probably covered up with these ...[?] when it got cold.

These are shots, close-ups of a diorama at the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History showing a Chumash village. And except for the bringing up the canoes from the ocean, the ocean in the background, probably the people in the L.A. basin and the San Fernando Valley didn't live too much differently than this. They, the people along the coast made plank canoes.

Also, they made dugout canoes. The plank canoes were pocked with asphalt, probably in Los Angeles area and probably traded all over the tar from the tar pits.

This one shows a Chumash woman stone boiling. All of the Indians practiced stone boiling. Now, the California Indians outside of the Colorado River area did not ever practice agriculture nor did they have pottery. And yet they must have been acquainted with pottery because they visited the Colorado River Indians and they must have seen them using pottery but they were using utilizing something different. They were making stone bowls, made out of sandstone and ~~steatite~~ steatite, soapstone and also basketry, tremendous amounts of basketry all kinds of shapes and sizes to do everything. And apparently this had worked out so well that they were not about to experiment with pottery. So they did not introduce it into their society.

Now, if you don't have pottery and you want to boil some food, and I'm sure they had their own version of ...[?], which is a little bit of everything, the leftovers of whatever you get for the day. I think it was supposed to have started in San Fransisco among the fishermen, which is what, fish and lobster and everything, everything and with a rather tangy sauce. However, the people in Southern California at this time seasoned it, I don't know. But they were able to boil their food and cook their food and heat whatever they wanted to heat by using baskets. They would take a large basket, rather firmly woven, select smooth stones from the beach, wash them, heat them in the fire and then using tongs, handmade, would pick them up, shake the ashes off of them, dips them in the water to clean them off and then drops them into the, whatever they were going to cook and then take a stick and stirring it very, very rapidly so that the stones don't burn the baskets. And apparently the people who have done this say that they can get it boiling in twenty minutes. So this is called stone boiling. And these stones can be found in the archeological sites.

They also waterproof their basketry using asphalt. These tar, tarring stones, as their called, again, can be found in



the archeological sites. They take small pebbles, these are small pebbles, maybe an inch in diameter, smooth, water worn, melt tar, drop these little pebbles in and pick them up by tongs, drop them into a basket and then shake the basket very rapidly, very vigorously until the inside is completely coated with tar. This completely waterproofs it once it's dry. The Paiutes and the Apache utilized pine pitch for the same purposes. So they actually had water bottles made out of basketry and canteens made out of basketry.

They had an extremely rich and varied diet, meat and fish of various kinds and a great deal of fresh ...[?], making use also, wherever they happened to live, of the pine trees and the pinon nuts or pine nuts. These could be stored to last them throughout the entire season until the pine nuts were available again the next year. So wherever they lived, they made expeditions to the pine forests to gather pine nuts. These are very rich in protein, oil. And as a staple, all of them utilized the acorn. Certainly at one time there were many, many more oak trees than it is today. Apparently there are two kinds of oak trees that produce acorns; one, a small acorn with a sweet meat, the other a larger acorn but with a bitter meat which contains tannic acid which is a poison. How many years ago they learned to leach the poison out, no one knows. But, through trial and error, you lose a few here and there, but you learn how to do it. And it is the woman who leached the acorn meal. First, the acorns were husked, the meat was cut up and then, usually again, using a basket, a large tray, a large open tray, putting the meat in it and then placing it on either sand or a lot of leaves, they would continually pour warm water over it. It might take two or three hours doing it constantly. I'm sure they had this down pretty pat as to exactly how long it took. Then when they thought it was about done they could take a little, tiny bit and place it on their tongue and if it was sweet, it was done. Then it was dried and it was ground into a meal, acorn meal with a metate and a mano, this is a milling stone and a hand stone. And they used the acorn meal in the same way that people in Mexico and in the Southwest use cornmeal or people use flour from wheat, could be made into a little cake and



cooked or it could be made into a porridge or a mush or it could be used as a beverage.. Let's see, what is it called in Mexico, atole? And flavored, all sorts of flavors now in Mexico, strawberry, pineapple, you can buy it in a store, restaurants. And probably then, this was used very much the same way we would use bread or potatoes as an accompaniment to a meal or the way Hawaiians use poi, which to me always tastes like library paste.

Acorn meal, acorn mush tastes better. I have tasted it. I was on one of the San Diego reservations and an elderly woman, who still made baskets and still made acorn mush, offered me some and it was rather tasty, sort of a nutty flavor but they never salted it.. She said never did they ever salt it. They liked it bland but they would use it the same way, I imagine, the Hawaiians use poi. I don't know whether they had one-finger and two-finger mush but they would have it in a bowl and then they would dip their hands into it and eat it along with their food. But acorns, again, like pinon nuts, provided them with food for a very long time throughout the season when the oaks were not producing because they could be stored. And some of the Indians made very, very large, when I say large I mean something like four and five feet high and three feet wide baskets. And the way they made it, they got inside and wove it around them as storage baskets for acorns and pinon nuts. So this certainly was a very good life, a generous environment and it produced a very, very interesting culture.

Now in terms of the place names, you might like to see some of these and I'll give you some of the Chumash. We are now talking about Shoshonean speaking people and here particularly of the variety called Gabrieleno. However, these names are very similar even in the Serrano area because remember I mentioned Moranga. The 'ngna' is a suffix in Gabrieleno and means "the place of". It's identification of certain villages, whatever it means in their language. And this is certainly where we now get Cucamonga. One 'n' was dropped by the Spanish and sometimes the spelling is changed and shift a little bit. The, a very large village near the Los Angeles River was called Yangna. And this is, at least in the public schools, they used to teach a section, about fourth or fifth grade,

called the Yangna Indians and that is what it means. 'Cause I've had students come and ask me in my classes, "Well, which ones were the Yangna Indians?" I said, "There weren't any Yangna Indians. There was large village called Yangna and it was contacted by some of the first Spanish expeditions as they came through. And I suppose in historic records they talked about the Yangna Indians of the basin and it was just one village. And in the San Fernando area you have Tahunga and Topanga, wherever you have that 'ngna' or 'nga' as the it is the second 'n' that has been dropped now. These all go back to the Gabrieleno place names.

...from a publication at the County Museum of Natural History showing the wikiups. Also, a portion of one of the plank canoes, also, how the Indian might have hunted deer, using themselves as a decoy, fishing and the women in it, shows the skirts. And one type of food they did use because it was very prevalent and very common and very useful, the cactus fruit. They also were marvelous stone workers, I mentioned the stone bowls. And throughout the Chumash and the Gabrieleno areas, they used steatite. Now steatite came from the Gabrielenos mainly on Catalina Island where there is a very, very large deposit of steatite. And they traded it with all the people and a form of decoration on the steatite, not only steatite, but also bone, was to use a shell asphalt inlay. A groove would be cut around the bowl and it would be filled with asphalt and before it dried, they would stick in round drilled beads of olivella or ...[?] and it would make a very lovely decoration. Now these are all dead white and that's because the shells have lost their color. But when you collect them and use them their very, very beautifully colored, a lot of iridescent beautiful colors. In archeological sites they turn out to be dead white, you might think, "Well, gee, why would they collect an old white shell?" Well, that's because when they were fresh they were very beautiful in color. They used these for necklaces and this shows some steatite beads that were decorated this way. And some, now these bone whistles, flutes and panpipes are actually from an archeological site. They did use panpipes.



They also all used, because even the people living in the San Fernando Valley and the Los Angeles Basin would either trade or make trips to the shore for fish and shellfish. So that sites throughout the San Fernando Valley, archeological sites, do have seashells in them, because they were using them. And they also fished, all of them, with shell fish hooks, making them out of, mainly of abalone or mussel. And you can see here various stages in the production of the shell fish hooks. These are round, incurved, nonbarbed. And apparently the people who had made them and have gone out to use them, say that they are extremely efficient. It's very, very interesting that these round, incurved shell fish hooks are only found in three places: the coast of Southern California, the coast of Chile and Hawaii.

Dr. Heiser from Berkley has made a statement in one of his publications that, there's no way of proving it, but he said this could be an instance of diffusion of a trait by way of the fish. Somebody could have caught a fish, it got away, and as you know, they crossed the Pacific, some of these fish and we don't know where the trait started but it could have say gone from Southern California to Hawaii where somebody caught the fish, found the fish hook in there and decided that, "Ah, now that's a good way to make good fish hooks.

Now, I wanted to mention, you can see here that these are typical Gabrieleno names so the language then is rather distinctive. Now, some of the names for the Chumash area, from Malibu northward, and these are all from Hoka: Pismo, Lompoc, Sespe, Ojai, Saticoy, Mugu, Malibu, Hueneme. All of these are Chumash. And you can see that it's a very different sound to it, than Gabrieleno. Well, I think that's about it. Any questions as to the, I left out alot of things but there is alot to talk about about the southern coastal and inland Indians but I think I gave you some idea of what they were like and what their culture was like and what the Spanish found when they came in.

Question: [not audible]

Wissler: From all of the information that historians or anthropologists can find, is that they did not have the common cold. They did

not have, they were not immune to any of the so-called epidemic diseases and the viruses that apparently originated in Europe and the Mediterranean areas. So they didn't have, apparently influenza or cold or measles or chicken pox, any of these.

Question: [not audible]

Wissler: Probably not. I'm sure they don't have the stresses and strains that we have. And they, any kind of a simple, tribal culture has a place for everybody in it. So these, for instance, these societies did not have orphanages, and they did not have mental institutions, they did not have prisons, they did not have convalescent homes. They took care of these people within the family. And whatever they could do, they made use of and they were protected and encouraged by the immediate family so that, I suppose every culture's crazy in its own way. But there was probably very little tension in the type that we know.

Question: I have one other question. When they took the stones out of the fire, did they ever cook directly on the stones?

Wissler: Well, these are round stones like, oh, you mean the stones down below. I think, they probably cooked large things like a luau, covering them up with the ashes, yes.

Voice: The reason why I ask is ...[?] and when we went on picnics we used stones, you know, the flatter the better, maybe about like this, and put them in the fire and when they got very hot, rake them out and use them to fry hamburgers or steaks and I don't know where that came from, whether....

Wissler: Actually, the Indians used steatite for this. In fact their sort of a triangular, flat, little frying pan made out of steatite that's called a comal because that's what they call it in Spanish, with a little hole at the end which they would put a stick through. This was something that you would put over the fire, over the rocks. And that's probably how they would make their acorn tortillas.

Voice: I had thought that the beach rocks, when you heated them, some of them would blow.

Wissler: Some will, yes. Depends on the type.

Voice: Whatever we had in Illinois worked fine.



Voice: And I heard that the river rocks were supposed to be better than the beach rocks for ...[?].

Wissler: You can find alot of them on the beach. They have to be a certain composition.

Voice: And of course the ones that come along the beach, some of them wash down the streams.

Wissler: That's right and they also wash down from the mountains.

Voice: They have quite a display on that now at Yosemite, Yosemite Indians and they tell you where they go to the beach to find the certain types of rocks ...[?] during the steaming process. And they cook, in fact they grind the acorn, they leach them, grind them and they make their batter and cook them right there before you and give you a sample of it and then they show you where they get their ...[?] done by grinding ...

Voice: Oh, that's marvelous.

Wissler: I also see this happening in the various parks. I think this is very, very good.

Voice: These girls were ...[?] seemed to be college students but they were Indian. They were actually from these Indian tribes... by their talk and their age and ... In fact I think one of them said they were, they were there during the summer but they went to college in the winter.

Wissler: Well, that's good, getting the local Indians in on it. Fine. But this is very good. I think it's, the tourists learn much more about the Indians of the area and it makes the displays and exhibits much more important. But all the Indians from Southern California up to Northern California used acorns. It was the staple.

Voice: Are there any other questions?

Dodson: I'd like to ask about the language, Miss Wissler. Has Shoshonean disappeared? Are there...

Wissler: Oh, no there are alot of, the Hopi still speak Shoshonean language.

Dodson: I see. So it isn't a dead language at all.

Wissler: No, and I presume the Shoshone Indains still speak Shoshone. And many, the Piute speak a Shoshonean. Yet, they still speak their own language.

Voice: I forgot what the figure was, but I had once heard the number of Indians that are living in Southern California and I was amazed. Very large numbers.

Wissler: There are, yes, there are. There are a very large number of reservations in Central and Northern California and in Southern California. The Diegueno, the Luiseno. Anytime you go to Mt. Palomar, you go right through Indian reservations. Most people don't realize that these are real Indian reservations. But these are highly acculturated Indians. Around Pala, the Luiseno, a lot of them are ranchers, have beehives, things like that and in the Diegueno area, down near Julian, a lot of them have Italian names and that's because in the 1800's, many Italian immigrants came there and settled and planted vineyards and intermarried with the local Indians. So they had Italian names which is very odd because you expect Spanish and they're Italian.

Voice: This is totally off the wall ...[?] bees. Are they native to North America?

Wissler: Oh, yes. In fact, Mexico had a type of bee which was a stingless bee, which, by the way, the entomologists are hoping will interbreed with the killer bees from Africa on their way to the United States so that they will not be as aggressive when they get here. If any of you saw the film, The Killer Bees.

Voice: I heard reports ...[?] and the thing is that the bee that people down there have is such a mild bee that these bees that seem killer bees to them are really no more harmful than our regular old California bee that you get stung by all the time. So there's kind of a culture back in there where to them these bees seem terrible because their bees are so mild but by the time they get up here to us, we won't think they're so terrible 'cause they're not that much more ferocious than...

Wissler: But they are. The African ones are.

Voice: They're poisonous.

Wissler: Yes, indeed. These are the ones that were brought in by a scientist into, is it Brazil, where ... and decided, they had European type bees there, plus their own variety. Now, they are not as vicious but they don't get much honey, whereas the African bees were vicious and aggressive but they gave a lot of honey. So we got all experiments, see. And in a laboratory with a hive, I all tried to interbreed them so we'll have a less aggressive bee producing a lot of honey. And so they did this by allowing them to get out the window to get the pollen and honey and stuff, I mean, nectar. But they put a grate on



the hive so the queen couldn't get out, only the worker. One day, a worker left the grate off. Out went about half a dozen queens and they have not been able to contain them and as of now they are now in Northern South America. They made their way to Northern South America. I think they're in Guiana. So the Mexican government has all sorts of things that they're going to do to contain them at the border 'cause they don't want them in their country. But one thing is they will not live beyond a certain temperature. They cannot live in the cold so if they got to the United States, they could only live in the south, including Southern California.

Voice: Any other questions?

Voice: Margie, might I suggest that they clip things, 'cause a lot of people will see things and just tell them to clip them.

Voice: ... newspaper clippings and bring them, send them to the history museum.

Voice: Yes Mrs. Petit suggests that you all bring, for the museum, the clippings and she has done it and she says she just saw the Allikliks here the other day and here (Voice: That's it, right there, that shows...) sure enough we hear about it here today on our chart.

Wissler: That shows their grinding implements.

Voice: Did you have a comment or question?

Voice: Yeah, a couple of comments. In our club we have a brother and sister that are registered members of the Morongo reservation and they could give you a lot of information, not only the past but the present because they were involved in the [not audible].

Wissler: Pat [name?] by the way is president of the Native American Indian Club.

Voice: Any other comments? And thank you so much Miss Wissler. [Applause] And I guess we stand adjourned then.

Wissler: Okay, do you want to pass back the pictures and you can keep the chart and the map.

Dodson: You have been listening to a talk by Miss Mildred Wissler of the Los Angeles Valley College Department of Anthropology. This talk was given at a meeting of the Los Angeles Valley College Museum Association. The date is December 6, 1976.